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SUBJECT: ITALY URGES SYRIA TO STOP ARMS FLOW

Classified By: DCM Anna M. Borg for Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (C) Summary. Prime Minister Prodi sent his diplomatic adviser to Damascus September 6 with a message for Asad urging compliance with the terms of resolution 1701 and a halt in the arms flow to Lebanon. It was the latest in a series of direct Italian messages to Syria, coming on the heels of an earlier visit by a senior MFA official and a Prodi telephone call to Asad. Continuing the stepped-up Italian Middle East diplomatic activity, Foreign Minister D'Alema planned to depart September 7 to Jordan, the West Bank, and Israel. End summary.

¶2. (C) Pol M/C and PolOff met September 6 with MFA Office Director for the Eastern Mediterranean Luciano Pezzotti and Italy's Ambassador-Designate to Lebanon Gabriele Checchia (who arrives in Beirut October 2). Pezzotti, who accompanied MFA DG for the Middle East Riccardo Sessa on his August 23-24 visit to Beirut and Damascus, termed the Italian discussions with Syrian Deputy FM Faisal Miqdad "friendly but difficult." He said the Italians had urged Syria to stop the flow of arms to Hizballah, allow UNIFIL to patrol the border if asked by the Lebanese, and otherwise comply with UNSCR 1701.

¶3. (C) Pezzotti said PM Prodi's Diplomatic Advisor, Stefano Sannino, had left that same morning (6 September) for Damascus to meet with President Asad. The purpose of the trip was to deliver a strong message from Prodi, reinforcing the earlier Sessa message to Miqdad. Pezzotti said Rome's message (also delivered in PM Prodi's August 29 phone call to Asad) was that positive action was the only way for Syria to regain the confidence of the international community and end its isolation.

¶4. (C) He said Italy's information was that up to half of Hizballah's arms supplies had been depleted. They could not be trusted, but given their diminished capacity, they probably had an interest in avoiding confrontation in the immediate future. That meant there may be a short window, of "a few years at most", and the key now was to prevent replenishment of Hizballah arms supplies. Italy had focused heavily on this in its contacts with Syria.

¶5. (C) Pezzotti felt that Iran was the big winner in the recent conflict, providing material support to Hizballah and economic support to dispossessed Shi'a in the aftermath. Syria's relative position, on the other hand, may actually have been weakened.

¶6. (C) Meanwhile, the MFA official said, FM D'Alema, Sessa, and Pezzotti planned to travel September 7 to Amman, Ramallah, and Tel Aviv where they would meet with King

Abdullah, Abu Mazen, PM Olmert, and FM Livni. Pol M/C observed that Italy had played a very positive leadership role, from the Rome Conference to UNIFIL troop contributions, and we all looked forward to resuming efforts on the peace process. But, he cautioned, the immediate task at hand was Lebanon, and especially ensuring compliance with Resolution 1701 and helping the Lebanese government assert its authority. The first priority was to get Lebanon right; we would then be better positioned to see what is possible on the peace process.

¶7. (C) Pezzotti agreed that it may be early for any kind of major initiative with the Israelis and Palestinians, but the issue was obviously central to regional stability and Italy wanted to "get them thinking" about it. The US, of course, was the key factor in making anything work. Pol M/C said we should start with what we've already got. President Bush was the first US president to call for the establishment of a Palestinian state. The roadmap, and the President's vision of peace, encompassed not only a Palestinian-Israeli agreement, but a comprehensive peace.

¶8. (C) On prisoners, Pezzotti felt it was important that Israeli corporal Shalit be released, and noted the political importance of the prisoners issue to Abu Mazen. He speculated that perhaps Shalit could be released, and Palestinian detainees let go in stages. He said Italy was not playing any role in negotiating the release of Israeli, Lebanese, or Palestinian prisoners. Pol M/C said it would be important that any political benefit accrue to Abu Mazin, and not to Hamas.
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